

# St Photini – The Woman at the Well

## A Biblical Meditation

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The powerful story of the woman at the well (John 4:1-42) speaks to followers of Christ, women and men, in every place and every culture. This story about a particular Samaritan woman, whose name has come down to us in the tradition as Photini, reminds us of many of the fundamental themes of the teaching of our Lord – repentance, discernment, inspiration and discipleship.

In the Orthodox liturgical calendar, St Photini and her sister St Photia are remembered on 26 February. Additionally, this story is one of the five accounts from the gospel of John which are read during the eucharist on the five Sundays between Easter and Pentecost. One of the many hymns of the day which speak of her captures the spirit of the celebration:

When the woman of everlasting memory came to the well,  
She found you, the water of wisdom.  
Because of her deep faith,  
You satisfied her completely, O Lord,  
And you bestowed on her  
The kingdom that lasts forever.

### The initiative of the Lord

As with many accounts in the gospels, this story depicts Christ taking the initiative to heal and restore one of his precious children. At the well of Jacob, Jesus encounters a woman, a Samaritan woman, a woman who appears to be living in violation of the laws of Moses and whose life seems to be out of control. In initiating a dialogue with her – “Give me a drink” (v.7) – Jesus is going far beyond the letter of the Mosaic law to reach out to someone whom many would view as impure and immoral. A rabbi would be expected not to have any direct contact with such a person.

Photini knew this all too well. No doubt she had experienced her share of abuse and discrimination from “religious people”, for it is all too

easy to harm others in the name of religion and to misuse the Scriptures as a pretext for degrading someone else. And so she responds to the Lord’s request with a question: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (v.8).

Though perhaps asked with a measure of sarcasm, her question was perfectly logical. The woman knew that Jews were not supposed to have any contact with Samaritans, that the prevailing opinion among the Pharisees was that the Samaritans were heretics who distorted the Mosaic law. Moreover, they were not considered to be true Jews; they lacked “racial purity”. Thus they were to be avoided at all costs. Besides, she was a woman unaccompanied by her husband. Clearly, it struck her as strange that Jesus, viewed by many as a noted rabbi, would enter into a conversation with her. Yet Jesus had taken the initiative. Indeed, he had asked her to help him by drawing water from the well. The water of Jacob’s well became a common bond drawing these two people together.

There is an important insight here. God encounters us where we are. He meets us in the present circumstances of our life in order to offer us his mercy and love. Like the Samaritan woman, none of us is worthy; and none of us can make ourselves worthy. God’s love is not something we can earn. It comes to us freely in spite of our condition. As Photini encountered Christ at Jacob’s well, so too the risen Lord is present in our midst, offering us the mercy and love of our heavenly Father.

### The woman’s discernment

Jesus responds to the woman’s initial question with a challenge: “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (v.10). In a sense this is a call to respond to his initiative, an invitation to open her heart to him. In the dialogue that follows, it becomes clear to the woman that Jesus is speaking not about the physical water which comes from Jacob’s well but about “living water”, the gift of salvation which brings refreshment, healing, renewal and new relationships. “Everyone who drinks of this water [from the well] will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (vv.13-14).

Despite her circumstances, the Samaritan woman grasps the significance of the Lord and his words. In the very depth of her being, the child of God responds to the Lord. An interior transfiguration begins to occur and her true self, created in the image and likeness of God, begins to emerge. Wisely she says to the Lord: “Sir, give me this water so that I

may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water” (v.15). This is a moment of discernment, a profession of faith in Christ.

As it continues the discussion gradually becomes more personal. Slowly and cautiously the woman reveals the condition of her life. She acknowledges that she has had five husbands; and when Jesus notes that the man she is presently with is not her husband, she does not deny it but responds by declaring that Jesus is a prophet. In one of his homilies St John Chrysostom pays special attention to this point in the story:

What then did the woman do? She did not show resentment, nor leave him and run away, nor think the whole affair a disgrace. Rather, she marvelled at him and persevered the more, for she said: “I see that you are a prophet” (*Homily 32 on the Gospel of St John*).

As we follow the dialogue, we find ourselves wondering how she had been treated by her five husbands? How did she cope with the abuse she must have experienced? What little we know about her indicates that her life must have been filled with disappointment and a sense of personal failure. Her series of broken relationships no doubt did little for her sense of self-worth or her ability to trust others. She may have come to expect abuse from others, especially from men.

All of this must have affected her relationship with God. The disappointments and betrayals she experienced, the abuse she suffered at the hands of others and her own tragic choices must have made it difficult for her to believe that she was truly a valued daughter of God. Her trust in God’s mercy and her hope in God’s forgiveness must have been weak.

Recognizing this, we are struck by the compassionate way Jesus treats her in this dialogue of healing and reconciliation. Jesus takes seriously the person with whom he is speaking. He is able to look beyond the circumstances of her life to affirm her lovingly as a person of intrinsic value and goodness. He asks questions, but he also listens. He is able to convey empathy and respect for Photini as a person who belongs to God the Father. He expresses a love for her which she may never before have experienced.

Although he learns of her tragic situation, Jesus does not stand before her as a harsh judge. He does not reprimand her as a “heretic” or reject her for being “impure” according to the Mosaic law. He does not condemn her for her sins. Rather, he speaks to her as the Good Shepherd, concerned with the well-being of each member of his flock. Jesus recognizes her dignity as a daughter of God.

Yet at the same time Jesus wants Photini to see herself and her situation clearly. Reconciliation and healing require an honest assessment of oneself. Jesus’ very respect for Photini provides her with a basis to

expose the true condition of her life to him. His presence and his compassion enable her to begin the process of *metanoia*, the deep change which reorients her life towards God. In this encounter at Jacob’s well Jesus created a safe place in which the living water could overflow, an environment in which Photini could look honestly at herself and recognize the love of God revealed in Christ.

The dialogue between the Lord and Photini moves on to a discussion of worship. Once again, Jesus is not at all reluctant to discuss such an important issue with a Samaritan woman. Clearly a thoughtful person, Photini immediately points to the debate between the Jews and the Samaritans over where God is to be worshipped. Both emphasized the historical significance of a particular location: the Jews affirmed the centrality of the temple in Jerusalem, the Samaritans believed that the appropriate place was Mount Gerizim.

Jesus declines to be drawn into this old debate. Instead, he explicitly rejects the emphasis on an historic location and emphasizes the deeper character of authentic worship:

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... The hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (vv.21-24).

This brief, powerful and authoritative affirmation emphasizes worship which is sincere and authentic, which does not depend on a particular place. Ultimately, this is an approach to worship centred on the revelation which Jesus himself is bringing as the promised Messiah.

Again, the Samaritan woman gains deep insight into the person of the Lord and recognizes the truth of his words. She responds at once to the Lord and his teachings. Despite the burdens of the past, she humbly and faithfully confesses that she is waiting for the Messiah. She acknowledges the deep spiritual longing in her heart. With profound conviction she says, “I know that the Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us” (v.25).

Jesus honours this conviction and affirms her faith. When Jesus declares that he is the Messiah – “I am he, the one who is speaking to you” (v.26) – it is truly a theophany. At that very moment the Samaritan woman becomes a privileged witness to the mighty acts of God.

In this encounter at Jacob’s well Jesus reveals his own identity as the promised Messiah. In so doing, he reveals also the love and mercy of God and the dignity of the Samaritan woman. Photini responds to the presence of this Christ. Despite her past, despite the abuse she had ex-

perienced, she comes to know Jesus as her Lord and is able to see herself as a beloved daughter of God.

We also need to respond to the presence of the Lord and to the love he offers. That response may take different forms depending on our own spiritual journey and the circumstances of our own life. Photini expressed her response initially through a willingness to enter into a dialogue with Jesus, then in her confession of her life's situation, then in her profession of faith. And, as we shall see, she went on to express it in her willingness to be a disciple.

There are different ways of responding to the presence and prodding of the Lord. What is important is that an honest response take place. Because of her response, Photini came to know Christ as the Messiah and her Lord. Our responses to the Lord through prayer, confession and profession of faith also help us truly to know him as our Lord and thus to deepen our relationship with him. In this way Christ becomes for us not a distant figure of the past but a friend and companion in the present.

### **The disciple and missionary**

The story of the Samaritan woman does not end with her own recognition of Christ as Messiah. Her encounter with Christ was a life-changing experience, which she wanted to share with others. After her meeting with the Lord, she leaves her water jar at the well and goes back to the village, where she begins to tell others about Christ. Abuse and rejection and the experience of God's healing and reconciliation gave her the wisdom and courage to share the good news with others. To those in her village she declares, "Come and see the man who told me everything that I had ever done. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (v.29).

Photini became an instrument of reconciliation. A woman whose life was out of control became the "enlightened one", a messenger to others of Christ and his light. Many of the Samaritans, we are told, came to believe in Jesus simply because of her testimony. They invited him to spend time in their village, and in turn many more came to believe in him as the promised Messiah. With joy in their hearts they turned to Photini and declared: "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world" (v.42).

St John Chrysostom affirms the missionary activity of Photini in the strongest terms, referring to the importance of her "apostolic work" by making a comparison (in *Homily 32 on the Gospel of St John*) between her and Nicodemus (John 3:1-21 the subject of the previous homily):

The woman at once believed and appeared wiser than Nicodemus. Indeed, not only wiser but stronger. For though he heard countless things of this kind, he neither summoned any other person to Christ, nor did he himself speak freely of him, while she engaged in apostolic work, spreading the good news to all and calling them to Jesus, drawing to him a whole city from outside the faith.

Elsewhere, he compares her with the disciples:

For, as far as she could, she herself did as the apostles had done, indeed with even more alacrity than they. For they left their nets after being called, while she of her own accord, with no summons, left her water jar and did the work of an evangelist with excited elation as a result of her joy (*Homily 34 on the Gospel of St John*).

There is also an important insight here for our own lives. Our relationship with Christ must inevitably involve others. In being drawn more closely to Christ, we are drawn more closely to others. For Photini this meant becoming not only a disciple but also a missionary. She told others of her experience of Christ. Again, how we share with others our experience of the Lord will differ. We are distinct persons in particular situations and blessed with particular gifts. What is important is that our relationship with the Lord, if it is genuine, is bound to affect our relationships with others. Not all of us will become missionaries like Photini. But our experience of God's mercy and love must be expressed in our relationship with others.

### **The other disciples**

An important part of this story is the reaction of the other disciples. Just before the events described in John 4, they had gone to buy food, so they were not present for most of the dramatic encounter that took place at Jacob's well. When they returned, they were astonished that Jesus was speaking to the woman (v.27).

The action of the Lord must have challenged the ethnic and religious sensibilities of the disciples, for as we have noted Jews and Samaritans customarily avoided contact with each other. What Jesus had done, therefore, did not fit with their expectations of how he should behave. Perhaps they were also afraid that this encounter would harm his reputation – and thus their own as well. Moreover, the Lord's action challenged their understanding of the scriptures and their religious tradition. The Mosaic law and religious customs prohibited the contact which took place here.

Perhaps the disciples too learned a lesson that day. Perhaps they learned that receiving the gospel message called them to go beyond what

they were accustomed to, beyond their way of thinking, to a genuine *metanoia*, a true change of heart and mind, open to the mighty actions of God and to the surprises of God in the present.

Like the disciples, we too can hold views which do not reflect the reality of the Lord and the gospel. We can have perspectives and prejudices which reflect more of our cultural background than of the teachings of Christ. We must therefore be constantly ready to let the gospel of the Lord penetrate more fully into our hearts and minds. With the help of our fellow believers, we need to be willing to assess our values and our perspectives on others in the light of the gospel.

### **An example of faith**

The story of St Photini, the Samaritan woman, is a story of a person who truly changed for the better because of her encounter with Christ. Despite her difficult past, she was willing to open herself up to the light of Christ. She became a person of faith; and because of this she was willing to be a disciple and to become a missionary. Photini became a bearer of the light of Christ and she shared this light with others. Because of this St John Chrysostom declares:

Let us then imitate the Samaritan woman. Let us converse with Christ. For even now he has taken his stand in the midst of us, speaking to us through the disciples and prophets. So let us listen and obey (*Homily 31 on the Gospel of St John*).

## **Growing Up Orthodox and Female**

### **A Story from the Middle East**

*MAHA MILKI WEHBE*

Forty years ago, in a modest house in a village in Lebanon lived three sisters and two loving parents, forming a happy family. In a setting of olive trees against rising mountains, life was simple. The village community, along with the fifty surrounding villages, belonged to the same church, served by a saintly priest who reflected the church to the people for 17 years, before becoming the bishop of another region.

Suddenly, one day the father of this family was gone. The four females of the house were on their own, without material or moral support. The situation was especially grave in a country where a family without a male at the head was marginalized and looked down on, if not degraded.

Because the eldest sister was suffering from a nervous breakdown, the middle sister was forced to the forefront. It was she who had to stand up to greedy neighbours trying to rob them of their land, without effective backing from her sisters and mother, who were ashamed, as "helpless females", to confront tough and persistent male neighbours. This sharpened her vision, directed her ambition and pushed her fears to the background. Thrust into an atmosphere of frustration, she turned it into a will to succeed.

She applied to the best university in the country and was awarded a full scholarship, which took care of her lodging and pocket-money. During the first year in Beirut, the war, which was to last for 15 years, broke out. Unable to reach her home town, she worried constantly about the condition of her elder sister. Under the circumstances, the nearby church and its youth group became her second family (later she would marry one of the members of the group).

The group was a dynamic one, venturing into the mountain villages to meet people, clean their churches, chant in their services. In this new community she learned more about Orthodoxy, both intellectually and spiritually. The group also opened her up to ecumenical activities and